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POPULAR AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA EXPLAINED THROUGH Visual Arts: USING DRAWING AS A TOOL FOR HUMOROUS AND OBLIGATORY CULTURAL CRITIQUE

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POPULAR AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA EXPLAINED THROUGH VISUAL ART:
USING DRAWING AS A TOOL FOR HUMOROUS AND
OBLIGATORY CULTURAL CRITIQUE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Visual Arts

by
Joel Reese Murray
December 2014

Accepted by:
Kathleen Thum, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Through my drawings, I focus on jostling the passive American viewer out of her/his complacent acceptance of the images delivered by popular media outlets. Using humor as a multi-functional tool, I combine and reinterpret recognizable media artifacts to comment on the content that makes up American culture. This body of work is a cultural critique, pitting the ridiculous and superficial entertainment we (Americans) so easily ingest against current and crucial moments in time (i.e: political protests, violence, death, etc). Often times, the current media landscape is saturated with fast-cycling images and stories that do not promote careful contemplation. Instead, these hurried/short-lasting bits of information are consumed, providing momentary satiation until the next news is delivered. It is my intention to disrupt the flow of news as entertainment to create moments of critical awareness through visual work, while pointing out the disturbing methods news organizations employ to encourage and perpetuate a culture that lacks agency.

I do this through my work and by citing relevant theoretical writing, current and historical artists and genres serving to bolster my critiques. I use multiple strategies to critique American media in a variety of ways. Beginning with the talking heads literally delivering the news, the anchorpersons and their feigned emotions, I use traditional aspects of portraiture to capture the disturbing theatrics so common in the news.

Process, the way that I draw, the substrate, the scale of the images, and the media I use, are all integral elements that influence the meaning of my work. Another notion I investigate is the idea of *paradox*. Mixing and matching images that are silly or absurd with images that are horrifying is a common strategy used to provoke an unsettled response from a reticent viewer. An added intention of mine is to extract images from Internet-based news sources in order to change their original meaning. Rendering casualties from current wars and skirmishes, I relocate these figures to a serene space where they become memorialized. Through most of these methods, a simultaneously dissipating and resurfacing humor is intertwined in the work (with the exception of the war time casualties series). The images have many different/contrasting qualities and evoke different sentiments. The contrasts often equate to contradictory viewer responses. It is this method of cognitive dissonance that works to critique American News media and subverts the way news media is received.

My overarching intention for this body of work is to mediate images seen on the news in order to provide viewers with opportunities for contemplation. I do this using a variety of drawing styles, different types of humor, mixing and matching images, and extracting and isolating images. My own cognitive dissonance, or, the discomfort I feel when experiencing contradictory thoughts, leads me to make peculiar decisions in my attempt to critique a disturbing part of American culture.

DEDICATION

It is with the utmost sincerity that I would like to thank each member of my thesis committee for the guidance and inspiration each one of you has given to me. Professor Kathleen Thum; your constant encouragement, care, and ability to keep me between the ditches has resonated with me and made my time in Clemson a more than worthwhile experience. You have changed the way I think about and experience teaching and visual art, and for that I am grateful.

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Todd McDonald; the painting course I took with you was one of the more influential studio courses I have experienced. Your teaching methods, the way you deliver information, and your knowledge of painting have served as an outstanding model. Our conversations about films, construction work, Pirsig and painting have helped me understand what kind of teacher I aspire to become.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Through my drawings, I focus on jostling the passive American viewer out of hers/his complacent acceptance of the images delivered by popular media outlets. Using humor as a multi-functional tool, I combine and reinterpret recognizable media artifacts to comment on the content that makes up American culture. This body of work is a cultural critique, pitting the ridiculous and superficial entertainment we (Americans) so easily ingest against current and crucial moments in time (for example: political protests, violence, death, etc.). Often times, the current media landscape is saturated with fast-cycling images and stories that do not promote careful contemplation. Instead, these hurried/short-lasting bits of information are consumed, providing momentary satiation until the next news is delivered. It is my intention to disrupt the flow of news as entertainment to create moments of critical awareness through visual work, while pointing out the disturbing methods news organizations employ to encourage and perpetuate a culture that lacks agency.

I do this through my work and by citing relevant theoretical writing, current and historical artists and genres serving to bolster my critiques. I use multiple strategies to critique American media in a variety of ways. Beginning with the talking heads literally delivering the news, the anchorpersons and their feigned emotions, I use traditional aspects of portraiture to capture the disturbing theatrics so common in the news. Process, the way that I draw, the substrate, the scale of the images, and the media I use, are all integral elements that influence the meaning of my work. Another notion I

investigate is the idea of *paradox*. Mixing and matching images that are silly or absurd with images that are horrifying is a common strategy used to provoke an unsettled response from a reticent viewer. An added intention of mine is to extract images from Internet-based news sources in order to change their original meaning. Rendering casualties from current wars and skirmishes, I relocate these figures to a serene space where they become memorialized. Through most of these methods, a simultaneously dissipating and resurfacing humor is intertwined in the work (with the exception of the war time casualties series). The images have many different/contrasting qualities and evoke different sentiments. The contrasts often equate to contradictory viewer responses. It is this method of cognitive dissonance that works to critique American News media and subverts the way news media is received.

CHAPTER TWO

SUBVERTING PORTRAITURE

News anchormen and women appear on Television as marionettes, disseminating information determined by six major organizations. This means the majority of the information/entertainment (the two are interchangeable) Americans consume comes from subjective news powers who have nearly monopolized this market. This equates to limited variance in the news while also limiting views antagonistic to those of the major conglomerates. I will begin with the mocking of the news anchors charged with disseminating news. I do this using portraiture.

Portraiture's function has obviously changed through out history due to mechanization and later technological advancements (analogue and digital cameras, television, etc.). Early portraitists aggrandized their subjects, creating an image that reflected a sitter's prosperity or social status. Contrary to the aforementioned goals of traditional portraiture, I use this mode of representation to create a disturbing image of the sitter, capitalizing on the pretense acted out nightly by news anchors. Although each individual portrait is centered in a vertical rectangular plain, the actual image is a pixelated façade with little detail pointing to a specific or well-known TV anchorman or anchorwoman. (See Fig. 1). This format obviously upholds portraiture's customary format by framing the sitter's face within a rectangular sheet of paper.

The series of pixelated portraits I created using graphite on paper depict different facial expressions made by television news anchors. The source images were derived from stills taken from news blooper reels. Each one of the sitter's facial expressions

oscillates through a myriad of contradictory emotions. It is difficult to discern whether each expression is one of hilarity, sadness, or terror.

Essentially, each facial expression trumps the sitter's all-encompassing identity. The sitter is unrecognizable. I am discarding the individuality, or his or her recognizable image, to explain generic talking heads that feign genuine responses to a variety of news stories. Very little true personhood can be taken from the make-up slathered anchorperson because it is her/his job to play the role of the emotionally attached information pusher. If an individual's social role outside of the news media could be considered a façade, then it could be argued that anchorpeople wear multiple masks, in addition to a mask made of make-up. After all, the T.V anchorperson is merely a T.V personality, charged with delivering current information in a stimulating fashion.

Another way to convey the notion of a façade is to add to the portraits the actual materials indicative of a façade. Applying make-up to the surface of the drawings of the newscasters inserts one more barrier between the viewer and the image. Dense applications of cosmetics form the cheekbones, highlight the lips, and accentuate their ocular sockets. The make up has a theatrical quality to it because it is highly visible. The hued bronzer and lipstick contrast with the graphite drawing underneath. The cosmetics are not smoothly dispersed over the entire face in the drawing. This unnatural appearance suggests anchorpeople, when seen on Television, create an entirely new persona. These portraits are two-dimensional illusions, fabrications of TV personalities that are conventional and agreeable to the news watcher.

An artist in dialogue with my own interpretation of portraiture is John Currin. Currin's painting *The Magnificent Bosom* (1997) oil on canvas depicts a makeup-slathered portrait of a woman with anatomically incorrect/oversized breasts. In the face of the woman in Currin's painting, the splotchy and thick make-up looks like patch work and functions similarly to how I have applied the make-up to my drawings. Currin's painting comments on the way American culture often defines "acceptable" standards of beauty or attraction with unreal accessories or physical augmentation. My intention is similar in that I wish to highlight the synthetic appearance and theatrical expressions of the news anchors I have drawn.

Because there is an element of terror in the portraits I have drawn, it is necessary to mention Jake and Dinos Chapman, who are a contemporary British collaborative (they are brothers) who jostle the viewer using portraiture. The Chapman's purchased Victorian paintings and altered each sitter's visages into grotesque, eye-lidless, rotten-fleshed zombies. Their series of paintings is titled *One Day You Will No Longer Be loved*. The Chapman's have appropriated images and altered them to look grotesque. I too use this strategy in my appropriation and manipulation of news anchors, which is seen in my series of disturbing portraits.

CHAPTER THREE

DECELERATING IMAGES EXTRACTED FROM NEWS MEDIA

My drawings are stationary, unlike the images and narratives seen on television or viewable via the Internet. News circulates at a rapid rate, providing little time for contemplation. Images and stories are rushed to the forefront of our consciousness, only to be quickly replaced by the next turn of events. Slowing down and freezing images holds opportunities for closer inspection, which is made possible by reinterpreting images through drawing.

News media disperses information that becomes the content of our culture, deciding for its consumers (watchers and listeners) what is important and what is not. It has become an authority over our collective thought because of its overwhelming presence. Media syndicates such as GE and Media Corp select and slant news in order to best serve their political interests and shape the opinions of their viewers. I question this authority by decelerating images through drawing so an on-looker can patiently decide its significance, or lack thereof. Providing a still moment for contemplation is the reason for making this work. It is important to make complacent viewers aware of the societal detriment stemming from easily accepting news that seems to have become solely entertainment.

An integral part of my cultural critique involves process, or, the conscious decisions I make while creating an image. The way I translate the source image onto paper, the style used to draw it, the time demanding procedure, and the media- are all vital parts of my practice. In order for these drawings to be recognizable, it is necessary

to link the drawing with the image's original appearance. An example being, if I want a drawing to reference political cartoons, then I must draw in a way that points to the characteristics of a political cartoon. Rendering their inherent visual qualities gives the viewer a context or frame of reference.

Screenshots taken from television news and Internet news sites have a pixelated characteristic. So that these images can be understood as pixelated, I draw in a somewhat mimetic fashion in order to capture this appearance. Diagonal and controlled mark-making, more geometric contours (as opposed to organic, curvilinear), and zooming in on the bitmap so square pixels are made more evident, amounts to pixilation.

This method could also be described as a kind of extrapolation, both literally and metaphorically. In one respect, I draw from an extrapolated image, or, an image in which the computer uses a mathematical formula to estimate the value and tone of each individual pixel. As a metaphor, the term extrapolate can also be explained as a way to expound upon or pull out the complexities of human experience and estimated value. I pull single images from many. Because I argue that the news media devalues significant moments in time by placing them next to insignificant moments, extrapolation is apt in explaining American culture's lack of image hierarchy (specifically in the realm of T.V news).

In order to emphasize the importance of the moments I pick, I use a labor intensive drawing process. Spending time with an image, becoming concerned with all its details, is the way the image becomes less dispensable. If one spends twenty seconds consuming an entire block of cheddar cheese, that person will later be dissatisfied with

the results following their hurried ingestion. Often I don't personally know the people I draw. One way to become more affected by that person's image is to methodically render it. This careful approach makes the resulting image more salient because there is evidence of the time it took to make the work, which is embedded in the drawing.

I use graphite to amplify photographic qualities. Photographic images make up much of the images presented in the news. Photography is a mechanized and quick method of capturing and distributing images. My work counters the immediacy of photography, and, at the same time references photographic images. I decelerate the viewers' interaction with images from the news by drawing. There is only one drawing accompanied by another drawing. The two images are not being reproduced in large quantities. Because there is only one image of one squirrel riding two water skis, an otherwise vastly consumed image becomes significant not only because of its singularity, but also because it is coupled with another image. I have re-contextualized the image (See Figures 2 and 3).

Another vital portion of my process is the way I choose and later combine images to create commentary. Interpreting the significance of an image and how it will function once paired next to another drawing further emphasizes the work's subject matter. I organize moments in time that speak to a much larger cultural critique. An example of how this commentary manifests can be seen in the coupling of *Tahrir Square 2011* (2014) with *The Triumphant One 2011* (2014). The first image chosen was a stationary scene depicting a group of Egyptian protesters gathered around a fallen comrade. This moment was filmed in 2011 during a riot in Tahrir Square. The scene captured is both

harrowing and admirable because it affirms the solidarity of the revolutionaries and the necessary sacrifices made in an attempt to overthrow a corrupt government. It is simultaneously tragic and triumphant in a literal sense.

The context and meaning of *Tahrir Square 2011* drastically changes when situated next to *The Triumphant One 2011* (a drawing of a waterskiing squirrel). *The Triumphant One 2011* is, at first glance, a humorous and victorious picture in its own right and devoid of any tragedy. Positioning both drawings side by side creates a fraught relationship caused by blatant discrepancies in content. The gravitas of *Tahrir Square 2011* is thwarted or cheapened by the humor elicited by *Triumphant One 2011*.

Each image was drawn on a twenty-two-inch by thirty-inch piece of paper, and a nearly identical amount of time was spent creating each drawing. Therefore, through the substrate, medium, scale, and applied effort, the two images become less separated, while holding similar value. The pairing makes it difficult to discern which image should be given more attention. This tactic of creating combinations of images becomes a disconcerting binary commenting on the way images are sequenced in the nightly news.

There is also an initial element of humor in this pairing, where the jovial and ridiculous nature of the squirrel is intended to trigger a giggle or a chortle. And, combining images that seemingly have no relation to one another subverts reasonable expectations. The discordance between riots and squirrels is extreme in many ways. There is cuteness and jovial happenings in the rendering of the squirrel. Those characteristics are rarely, if ever, associated with violent political protests/riots. This clash blurs puerile humor with far more grave subject matter.

Another important part of this diptych is the role it plays in the idea of Detournement. Detournement was promoted by the French theorist Guy Debord and the Situationists as one of many combatant strategies pushing against consumer culture. As explained in the text Beautiful Trouble: “Detournement appropriates and alters an existing media artifact, one that the intended audience is already familiar with, in order to give it a new meaning.” (Malitz). The application of Detournement can be seen in my diptych in that I appropriate two recognizable images and subvert their original meaning by situating them next to one another.

In another instance of detournement, I have merged together two images seen in the media: A riot in Kiev with a clown parade that took place in Philadelphia. Both occurred in 2014. *News* depicts two images that are intertwined by overlapping one over the other. The clown parade is more seen than the silhouettes of the protesters. In the space surrounding the clown filled silhouettes, a black outline of a riot scene takes place. I have used color as a way to coax the viewer into examining the image closer. The on-looker should come closer only to find that the saturated semblance is a parade of clowns that supersedes the rioters’ silhouettes. This strategy, tricking the viewer to come closer to the image, is a way to bring viewer closer to a peripheral image of a dead Ukrainian soldier. With the aid of the vibrant color and somewhat realistic style of rendering, the dead Ukrainian becomes noticeable in the right margin. The soldier’s name, country of origin, and the event that led to his death will be included in the title.

To address a possible, or, even likely understanding of this image hybrid as a damaging representation of the anti-government protesters; it is important to note that this

jumbled collision already occurs every time world news (of any brand) broadcasts. This drawing was not created to make light of peoples attempting to detach themselves from Russia. Giving a stationary example of how tv news operates can illuminate the problem, rather than perpetuate it.

Artist Ryan Trecartin's series of nearly hour-long films impacted my work in the way each one hyperbolically mimics popular culture in a disturbing fashion. The same way that I replicate the mashing of unrelated stories together, Trecartin's videos mash together disjointed narratives. The work deftly describes an American culture that is self-obsessed, childish, and downright ugly. Trecartin's films capture his version of popular television or reality. He has amplified this form of entertainment, which finds success in highlighting the disgusting side of what is now considered entertainment. My objective is close to that of Trecartin's.

CHAPTER FOUR

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SATIRICAL DRAWINGS DEALING IN HUMOR AND POLITICS

Historic and contemporary artists use visual art as a critical tool, satirizing political figures and their subsequent attitudes/actions. Satirical and political cartoons use humor to reach a broad audience. Daumier and Goya are two well-known artists working in a similar fashion and both heavily influence my drawings. As my work is also satire, using humor as a method to attract the uninterested to political subjects that are otherwise dull, terrifying, or depressing. I appropriate and combine images taken from the news. I transform these appropriations into skeptical, folly-filled depictions of the players orchestrating America's political landscape. With the addition of comedy, viewers are more receptive to an image. If the onlooker is more receptive, the original and disturbing relay becomes more palatable.

Satirists before me, the likes of Francisco Goya and Honore' Daumier, have used this method to translate the chaos dominating their time with a widely enjoyed wit. Goya's series of etchings titled *Los Caprichos* employ printmaking techniques to deliver biting allegorical narratives. *Caprichos* served as black-humored warnings commenting on repressive government, economic disaster, and ecclesiastical greed and corruption. The small-scale *Caprichos* subject matter capitalizes on institutional backwardness. Goya uses the human figure and culturally recognized symbolism in an amusing fashion to smooth the delivery of his biting protest. *Los Caprichos* dark charm heavily relies on the combination of wit coupled with exacting commentary. Similarly, my work serves to

hand out potent criticism using an approximate strategy in conversation with Goya's work.

Daumier, another note-worthy satirist, worked against the French Monarchy by attacking its figure-head, Louise Philippe. Daumier's satire made clear corrupt behavior by drawing a slightly manipulated portrait of Philippe. Daumier's lithograph *Gargantua* depicts Philippe as an enormous gourd-shaped glutton. The king's head looks like a gelatinous pyramid. Philippe's distended gut is on the verge of bursting. The literally miniscule destitute are commanded to hand over the little they have. The money is delivered up a ramp to feed Philippe's insatiable appetite. Correspondingly, I employ this kind of hyperbole and figurative manipulation in order to provoke laughter to avoid an otherwise requisite or expected delivery.

Daumier's style of drawing, his use of frenetic line, his figures amusing facial expressions have led me to make similar formal decisions. Daumier's masterful critiques of the human condition inspired the making of my own political cartoons.

My three mixed-media, political cartoons are heavily influenced by Goya and Daumier from a stylistic standpoint. However, I use different drawing media to comment on slightly different subject matter. My work focuses on the frustrating fact that choosing political party leaders often becomes about choosing the lesser of two evils. Adding to this disheartening information is the likelihood that any head of the state's actions will dramatically deviate from his/her predecessor. My own skepticism regarding this disturbing presidential cycle is presented in my political cartoon titled *Rotating and Celebrating* (2014).

To evade an outright defeatist's message, I arranged a composition featuring comical actions made by three iconic people: President Barack Obama, Ronald Regan, and Jesus Christ. Each icon's portrait appears horizontally in the top third of the picture plane. Obama's portrait is centered, hovering over a dancing figure sporting a bow tie and balloon pants. The absurdity of the dancing figure is: embellished by magenta-hued clothing, different sized shoes, and, celebratory posture. A hula-hoop spins around the static figures midsection. This cartoon freezes a moment for the viewer where entertainment collides with a more sobering message; that no matter who claims the presidency, whether it is Obama, or Jesus, dramatic improvement is out of reach.

In keeping with the majority of the media-focused work I explained thus far, I drew a cartoon featuring the baffled portrait of the media mogul, Rupert Murdoch. The image I created features Murdoch with a well-rendered, oversized head. Murdoch's head is loosely attached to a thinly outlined lab coat. Murdoch's pale grey hands extend just beyond the sleeve cuffs. The CEO of New Corp stands beside a mobile surveillance device featuring slinky-like penises with googly eyes attached to end of each arched phallus. Atop the machine sits a yellow and orange water-colored chicken. A serene blue sky serves as the backdrop for Murdoch and his homemade device.

The aim of this piece is direct. Murdoch's hand in wire-tapping and illegal surveillance motivated this cartoon. My piece's title *God and His Homemade Friend* infers Murdoch's omnipresence in global news media. Murdoch's reputation as an all-seeing, all-knowing media magnate makes his comparison to God applicable, not appropriate. Because this image is inappropriate- the perverse surveillance apparatus and

Murdoch's bewildered expression- one can laugh at this image. I draw an image that resembles the same absurdity found in Murdoch's improprieties. The aim is to alert viewers to Murdoch's dishonest behavior. Enrique Chagoya, a contemporary artist/satirist, draws and hand-colors cartoons relating his views on current American politics with a touch of humor. Chagoya's cartoons involve media and drawing techniques I use. His figures feature an outlined and awkward, or lumpy sensibility. He offsets cartoonishly drawn characters with highly skilled ink or graphite renderings, all within the same drawing. I apply this strategy to create recognizable and fully rendered figures I wish to satirize in order to inform the viewer of current political or news media based folly. Moving on from humorous satire, I created a series of drawings with more solemn content.

CHAPTER FIVE

MEMORIALIZING VICTIMS OF WAR: SEPARATING ENTERTAINMENT AND DEATH

Having established that television news networks often deem contrasting news stories equally important, I have found a way to once again work against this awkward manner of sequencing. Searching the Internet for images of fallen soldiers and civilian casualties of current wars and skirmishes around the world (Ukraine, Syria), I drew them in a space devoid of other muddled images. Using drawing, my intention was to memorialize these victims of war by extracting them from their original surroundings, which is the image-saturated Internet. To extract these humans from this overloaded space, placing them in a visually quiet white sheet of paper eliminates the formerly chaotic space. The dead people drawn can be looked at individually, rather than gawked at and easily discarded via the Internet, among many other images with similar and dissimilar content. The isolation of the bodies drawn in white space makes clear that the deceased are the focal point, which can be viewed in *Anonymous Ukrainian Soldier, Donetsk, Ukraine, 2014* (2014). See Fig. 7.

The negative space around each figure expands from one drawing to the next. While the drawings of the expired individuals keep similar scale, the sheets of paper grow incrementally larger from one drawing to the next. These individuals are now placed in an area conducive to respite, rather than peddled through a quick news cycle. The anonymity of each figure also comments on the way death is presented in the news. The news is using these images as shocking, faceless objects that hope to entertain the

viewer by disturbing them. Death becomes a selling point, used to boost ratings, which creates more revenue for major news organizations. Avoiding this kind of viewer reception is the reason for drawing these figures in an emancipatory space.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

My overarching intention for this body of work is to mediate images seen on the news in order to provide viewers with opportunities for contemplation. I do this using a variety of drawing styles, different types of humor, mixing and matching images, and extracting and isolating images. My own cognitive dissonance, or, the discomfort I feel when experiencing contradictory thoughts, leads me to make peculiar but necessary decisions in my attempt to critique a disturbing part of American culture.

FIGURES



Figure 1: *Pixelated Portrait of the Who in the Hell is that Lady*

Graphite of paper, 15"x11", 2014



Figure 2: The Triumphant One 2011

Graphite on paper, 22"x30", 2014



Figure 3: *Tahrir Square 2011*

Graphite on paper, 22"x30", 2014



Figure 4: *News*

Mixed media, 22"x30", 2014



Figure 5: *Rotating and Celebrating*

Mixed media on paper, 10"x11", 2014



Figure 6: *Rupert and His Homemade Friend*

Mixed media on paper, 10"x11", 2014



Figure 7: *Anonymous Ukrainian Soldier, Donetsk, Ukraine 2014*

Graphite on paper, 8"x11", 2014



Figure 8: *Who In The Wide World Of Sports Is That?*

Graphite, eye shadow, cosmetic foundation, lipstick on paper 11"x15", 2014



Figure 8: *Dead Syrian Man* 2014

Graphite on paper, 30"x16", 2014

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